

# THE HILL



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## **Three House Democrats hope study group sends a message**

*By Peter Brand*

A trio of junior House Democrats, in an effort to bolster their party's credentials in national security, has formed a study group to develop policy on security issues.

"It's very important that Democrats be seen as being strong, purposeful and having a clear message" on national security, said freshman Rep. David Scott (Ga.). "That's our charge."

Scott joined with two-term Reps. Adam Schiff (Calif.) and Steve Israel (N.Y.) to organize the Democratic Study Group on National Security after deciding they needed to develop more expertise on defense issues.

"There's been this false debate over which party is stronger or weaker on defense," Israel said Tuesday. "The issue for me is who's smarter and who's thinking about the future of warfare."

The trio's effort echoes the Military Reform Caucus, a bipartisan group of senators and House members that former Sen. Gary Hart (D-Colo.) co-founded in 1981 as a counterpoint to President Reagan's call for increased spending to defend against the Soviet Union.

In a telephone interview Friday from Denver, Hart said Democrats must craft a distinct policy on national security.

"We're a major party. How can you seek to govern the country if you haven't put out a cohesive defense policy?" he said. "And we haven't since Vietnam."

Hart added that many Democrats have backgrounds in national security that congressional Democrats should tap as resources, including former Sen. Sam Nunn (Ga.) and former Defense Secretary William Perry.

"There are some very smart people out there," Hart said. "We ought to be used."

Scott said that the study group plans to organize trips to military bases and to the United Nations and that he hopes such key administration officials as Defense Secretary Donald

Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell will meet with the group.

Scott said he even hopes British Prime Minister Tony Blair will offer his advice.

Rep. Martin Frost (Texas), a senior member of the Democratic Caucus, said he and other Democrats support the trio's effort. "I think a further understanding of national security is very important," he said.

Several ranking Democrats on key committees dealing with foreign relations and national security will serve as advisers to the group: Tom Lantos (Calif.), from International Relations; Ike Skelton (Mo.), from Armed Services; and Jim Turner (Texas), from the new Select Committee on Homeland Security.

Last January, in one of her first moves after becoming minority leader, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) held a forum on developing a Democratic platform on defense issues.

Among those who spoke were former National Security Adviser Sandy Berger, former NATO Supreme Commander Gen. Wesley Clark, and Hart, who served on the Intelligence and Armed Services Committees and recently was co-chairman of two commissions on homeland security.

Both Hart and Clark are considering running for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004.

Pelosi has also relied on members such as Skelton; Rep. John Spratt (S.C.), assistant to the Democratic leader and a senior member of Armed Services; and Rep. Jane Harman (Calif.), ranking Democrat on Intelligence.